

# Emmanuel Levinas

## The Other

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Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) was one of the most prominent ethicists of the twentieth century. Born in Lithuania to a Jewish orthodox family, Levinas took an interest in the Hebrew Bible from early age, but also grew up reading the works of Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. He witnessed the rise of the Russian Revolution after his family fled to the Ukraine during the First World War. At the age of 18, he began studying philosophy at the University of Strasburg, later spending two semesters at Freiburg University. Two German philosophers were to be a constant source of inspiration—and disagreement—throughout his intellectual life: Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. While following their lead in the phenomenological tradition, his thinking sought to problematize the foundations of their respective works. With the break of the Second World War, Levinas was drafted to the French Army. He was captured by the Germans and imprisoned in a prisoner-of-war camp until the end of the war. During that time, his wife and daughter were in hiding in a monastery with the help of Levinas's classmate at Strasburg, Maurice Blanchot. Upon release, Levinas discovered that most of his family had been killed during the war, including his parents, two brothers and in-laws. The Holocaust and its aftermath came to inform his conception of ethics, hanging over as a dark reminder of man-made atrocities.

In the following years, he immersed himself in studying the Talmud, the exigencies of Jewish law and tradition, which led him to publish a series of

commentaries in parallel to his philosophical writings. For more than two decades he served as the director of the École Normale Israélite Orientale in Paris, a position he left for his first professorship at the University of Poitiers. He began teaching at the University of Paris-Nanterre in 1967, then at the Sorbonne from 1973 until his retirement three years later. Levinas's philosophy has influenced a host of contemporary thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean-Luc Marion, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler.

Levinas's thought can be characterized as radical ethics: a consistent effort to prioritize ethics over metaphysics; or as he repeatedly phrased it: ethics as first philosophy. Yet the way Levinas intends ethics is far from precepts, virtues or norms. Ethics is not conception but relation—a relation with the other person who is encountered precisely as Other. The Other is not an alter ego, a version of the self; rather, self and Other are separated by an irreducible difference. That difference, however, is not inimical to the ethical relation, but is in fact what constitutes it in the first place. Ethics thus proceeds as the relation with the Other who escapes full knowledge and resists presumed commonality. There is always something about the Other that remains beyond the self's grasp—the Other's alterity—and that alterity demands acknowledgment and respect. Denying the integrity of another as Other signals the beginning of aggression and violence. In this sense, Levinas deems the ethical relation as responsibility—responsibility to and for the Other. He further claims that responsibility is the formative experience of subjectivity: the self is responsible before being self-serving, exposed to the outside prior to being concerned with itself. The precedence of ethics marks Levinas's departure from both Husserl and Heidegger: as opposed the intentional subjectivity proposed by the former, Levinas sees subjectivity as always predisposed toward the Other; and as opposed to the preoccupation with the question of Being of the latter, Levinas intends ethics as undoing ontology, as disrupting the establishment of essence and the securing of foundation.

## Central Themes

Levinas's thought has special pertinence to communication ethics as reflected in his persistent engagement with language and speech, and to a lesser extent with writing, throughout his thinking. Already in his early work of 1948, *Time and the Other*, he develops a contrarian notion of communication: "What one presents as the failure of communication in love precisely constitutes the positivity of the relationship; this absence of the other is precisely its presence as other."<sup>1</sup> That communication always stops short of fusion is revealed as its saving grace.

Failure of communication does not signal the end of the ethical relation, but rather its beginning as openness to alterity. Difference begets relation: what separates is what connects. From this follows a deep suspicion in any communicative agenda that seeks influence and persuasion, even if in the name of lofty ideals, and likewise in any model of complete or harmonious communication. Setting successful communication as a goal cannot but prioritize the same over the Other, thereby eliminating alterity. For this reason, Levinas expressed distrust in rhetoric, which he described (rather narrow-mindedly) as inclusive of demagoguery, psychology, and pedagogy, “taking the position of him who approaches his neighbor with ruse.”<sup>2</sup>

A key concept in Levinas’s philosophy is the face, which he develops principally in his first magnum opus *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961). The face of the Other is more than a mere portrait: it is the forefront of the Other’s alterity. Encountering the face of the Other surpasses knowledge of the Other, as he writes: “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me* ... The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me ...”<sup>3</sup> The face faces: exposure and frailty are its basic expressions. But the face is not a simple presence, it speaks—in fact, it is the source of all speaking and discourse. The face opens the horizon of addressing and being addressed. While having ties to the philosophy of dialogue, Levinas’s idea of speaking, as the conjunction of facing and addressing, goes further than that of Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin, who were also concerned with addressability. The face calls me into responsibility, to respond to and for the Other. As opposed to Buber’s Thou, the Other for Levinas is not only an interlocutor with whom to reciprocate in dialogue. The Other has priority: responsibility is unidirectional, proceeding without concern if and how the Other responds back. Being responsible presupposes primal exposedness and receptivity, a thoroughly responsive self that gives itself to the Other.<sup>4</sup>

Levinas’s later work concerns the conditions of ethics with an emphasis on “ethical language,” the intricacies of attending to the Other through language without reducing the Other to a subject in language. In his second magnum opus *Otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence* (1974) Levinas develops two modalities of language: the Said (*le dit*) and the Saying (*le dire*). The Said is the content of language, the meanings given and received; it is the representational aspect of language, encompassing the potential to represent the world and share these representations with others. The Saying is the relational modality of language, the event of addressing and being addressed, of approaching another beyond and through the content delivered. The Said is given to the Other who always remains beyond the Said, escaping full thematization. Speaking involves uncertainty; the Other is approached but is never completely known. Yet the Said and the Saying are

intricately liked: There is no Saying other than the expression of a Said, and there would be no Said without the impetus of the Saying. Levinas's important point is that communication is not and should never be reduced to the circulation of information, to the Said, as at base it is about relationality: "Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure."<sup>5</sup> And that relationality transcends conceptualization, signifying through the Said but is never completely subsumed within the Said. The Saying suggests itself by unsettling the Said, interrupting its thematizing power. Communication is ethical only insofar as this interruptive potential of the Said by the Saying is preserved.<sup>6</sup>

## Communication Ethics Implications

Levinas's contribution to communication ethics rests on redefining both communication and ethics. Communication truly worth the name is a limit experience: failure, lack, and refusal are inherent to striking contact insofar as providing openings to encounter the Other beyond presumptions. Against the tradition that deems the completion of communication as ethically favorable, Levinas advances a notion of precarious communication, one that involves uncertainty and risk. Such communication is at the service of ethics—the responsibility for and the response-ability to the Other—an ethics that puts relation before knowledge and obligation before understanding. All this does not amount to disqualifying completely the benefits of operational communicative action, without which society cannot function. Politics, law, and science depend on such functionality (in Levinas's terms on the Said) to achieve their goals. A Levinasian ethics of communication does not reject such considerations but seeks to put a check on their dominance. Nor does it eschew the problem of multiple others who all demand to be treated as an Other, that is, with responsibility. Here arises the question of justice, of negotiating between multiple others, and of comparing different demands, which necessarily calls for the exercise of reason—that is, discourse of the Said. Yet justice for Levinas does not constitute a final resolution of all appeals but rather a situation, itself precarious, that sustains the possibility of exposure to the unexpected—the possibility for the Other to appear as a face and for the Saying to interrupt the Said. Reason and responsibility are thus in constant tension, and by maintaining that tension, justice is served.

In today's culture of communication, which puts a premium on effective communication in both private and public contexts, Levinas's intervention provides a crucial counterintuitive insight. Against dominant mindsets (be they therapeutic, corporate, or scientific) that seek in communication certainty, control, and clarity,

Levinas's philosophy supplies a modicum of indeterminacy. A Levinas-inspired communication ethics would be one that embraces differences and gaps as integral to and redemptive of our communicative relationships.

## Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 94.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 70.
3. *Ibid.*, 50–51.
4. Ronald C. Arnett, *Levinas's Rhetorical Demand: The Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), 243.
5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 48.
6. Amit Pinchevski, *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005).